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Rosh Hashanah Morning 2019/5780
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The Reform Temple of Forest Hills

She faced a talking scarecrow, flying monkeys, and a green meltable witch. But when Dorothy Gale looked up at her Auntie Em and reflected on all that happened in her adventures in Oz, she simply said: “There’s no place like home.”¹

“Home” is one of the most comforting words and concepts we have. As John Howard Payne wrote almost 200 years ago, “Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble there’s no place like home.”

We come together in our Jewish home today. The Reform Temple of Forest Hills is home throughout the year or just on these holidays, but still it is our home. A place of comfort and concern, of celebration and mourning. And this year we celebrate 25 years of RTFH. It was in 1994 that four synagogues – Temple Sinai, Temple Isaiah, Beth Hillel, and Temple Emmanuel joined together in a merger to become the The Reform Temple of Forest Hills. And whether you’ve been part of this community for 25 years or 25 days, this year we reflect on where we’ve been and where we are going.

I asked a few people who were around during the merger what stuff resonated with them. Kathy Francos who was at Isaiah, found the merger time to be very supportive – everyone was happy to be coming together and helping each of the synagogues find new possibilities. Roberta Trager, who was at Sinai, agreed it was a happy, reassuring time as building, rabbi, and members joined together and blended the communities. From Emmanuel, Mildred Friedman felt her smaller synagogue was welcomed warmly by everyone else and made her feel comfortable. And Susan & Stanley Friedman said that the new community felt like home right from the beginning. Everyone was facing something new and had reasons to make it work.

And it worked so well. 25 years of memories from personal events like *b'nai mitzvah* and weddings to community programs like the retreats at Kutz Camp and Temple galas. From Religious School and ToFHY to Men's Club and Sisterhood, now Women's Connection. From Temple Tots to Horizons; big holidays like today to smaller gatherings like Tu B'shevat seders. Making a difference to the world through Social Action and making a difference for ourselves through Torah Study. Clergy, congregants, friends, family, neighbors, all connected to our synagogue.

At the 20th anniversary, I asked congregants to share some memories. One of my favorites was Jerry Ball who remembered all the times he went searching for his daughter Hannah in the building and would find her under the stairs with her friend Leah. Hannah's favorite memory was hiding under the stairs with Leah. Susan Kane put it so beautifully when she said. "Throughout these years at RTFH there have been so many memorable moments that it's hard to choose just one. But I am sure of one thing: Joining the Temple is the best thing I have ever done. It is a place where I flourished, had continuous support, enjoyed many activities, made good friends and always felt at home."

On Yom Kippur morning at our Layperson's Hour, we'll hear from a diverse group that has been part of RTFH in one way or another this past quarter century. Don't miss this reflection after Yom Kippur morning services.

When I ask people about RTFH, they recognize it as a location, but what stands out to them is the community. Lillian Alexander, who was part of the merger, feels that it is the people that make it a home. She connected over the years to those around her as her family, which she finds especially important because she has a very small family. Over and over again people reflected that RTFH was about the people and the connections. Ilyse Sisolak sees so many people as her extended family, surrogate grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins to her 3 kids.

I asked our sixth graders about RTFH. They don't know much about the merger or our past, but they mentioned all their friends they have here and how many people they know. 25 years ago the TV Series *Friends* premiered. And we've been a synagogue of friends and family ever since. The sixth graders also reflected that Temple is a safe space for them. It is a calm port in their sometimes overprogrammed lives. It's somewhere where they know there are adults like the Rabbi and Cantor they can always turn to. It is a comfortable place to be a Jew and to be their own individual self.

Synagogues today are sadly targets for antisemitism, such as the horrific shootings this past year at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and Chabad of Poway near San Diego. Synagogues are also both literally and figuratively our sanctuary to find comfort and safety. It is by gathering strong within this home that we stand against the bigotry and hatred we still face in these modern times. Our synagogue has been for 25 years a place to be yourself and to join together, for a diverse group to find their own community to create memories for ourselves and as a congregation. Now at 25 years we have to not only look to the past, but ahead to tomorrow.

RTFH is in a place of strength and connectedness. We have our wonderful new Cantor Emily Wigod Pincus leading us with talent, passion, and heart. We have a stable membership, invested leaders, great staff, and exciting programs. As we celebrate our 25th anniversary, it is the perfect time to also look ahead to our future.

We are in our familiar building from that merger 25 years ago. The building is much older than that and needs repairs and attention regularly. It is also full of stairs. How meaningful it would be to pray in a building where everyone could come together including those in a wheelchair. The words of Isaiah we say on Yom Kippur should be part of our reality, "A house of prayer from all people."² A new, beautiful,

modern, ADA compliant building would allow us to reimagine ourselves and ensure the future for our congregation for the next 25 years and beyond.

We've been exploring options. While any plan will take years to unfold, research has begun to see what our possibilities are. We are looking to rezone our property to allow the building of a taller structure on this site. Then we could work with a developer to build a new building with the first floor being our own synagogue and the floors above us being apartments. We also could look for another location here in Forest Hills and build there. Either plan would provide funds to secure our congregation for years to come. Either plan should allow us to create the synagogue building we deserve – open, accessible, matching our values and our potential for the next quarter century. Either plan allows us to grow and affirm our congregational home.

Rosh Hashanah morning is not the time to review these details. We shared more specifics at a recent Town Hall meeting and via email to the congregation. We'll continue to keep everyone updated all along the journey and get your feedback, wisdom, and input. Our future will be full of the wonderful home the last 25 years have provided – bursting with people, memories, and connections. Wherever our building is, RTFH is always our Jewish home.

As Jews, we are familiar with journeys. Abraham changed locations multiple times as he first encountered Canaan. In the Exodus, we spent 40 years searching for our home, and then several thousand establishing Israel as our homeland. We are people who understand moving and change. Wherever we are, we establish our home and communities there. Midrash Tanhuma tells us, “A person who completes the building of a new home or purchases new vessels must recite a blessing upon that occasion.” As Jews we celebrate our growth and change. Even when that change is difficult or challenging.

Our Rabbi Emeritus Mayer Perelmuter recently told me, “Jews constantly create new sacred spaces.” We create sacred space wherever we gather in love and prayer and holiness. Jews don’t make buildings sacred; Jews make communities sacred. The blessings of RTFH is in our members, our families, our relationships. A building may be powerful, but this congregational community is our home.

Many of us have experienced such moves. Only a few of us will live in one house or apartment for their entire lives. When we move, we are sad because of the meaning of our physical space and the love we shared there. It is the people within it and nearby that have the most impact. Writer Lois McMaster Bujold describes it as, “My home is not a place, it is a people.”³ Nearly two thousand years earlier, Pliny the Elder summed it up even more simply, “Home is where the heart is.”

One Temple family told me about their move from Portland to Queens. Marc Fernandes was a New Yorker, but he and his wife Ivette and their two small kids moved to Portland for opportunities. They didn’t have a clear plan and knew they’d “figure it out.” It did work out as they bought their first home as a family and got into gardening in their yard. But as much as they loved the house, they weren’t in the right community. After 6 years, they returned to New York City for a better match of people and opportunity. Marc reflected on what it meant to be here, “Home is a feeling of being fully able to just be. Not have to ever question how I am. I can just be.”

I asked his son Luca how the experience was for him when he moved here at 8-years-old. Luca shared he loved his friends in Portland, but knew Queens would work out when he saw two kids playing outside his new apartment and they became fast friends. I asked him if the friends he made in New York is what made it home. He thought about it and then said, “Yes. Friends. And also, sushi restaurants.”

“Where we love is home,” wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes. Our own Cantor, Emily Wigod Pincus, moved homes from Metuchen, New Jersey to New York City with her husband Drew and their 10-year-old-son Nathaniel this summer. While no stranger to New York, it was a big move after 12 years in the Jersey suburbs. But home is about right now – where we connect in this moment. For Cantor Emily, it has turned out to be Forest Hills. “I had thought that after many years in the *midbar*, the wilderness, I had finally found my true home,” she reflected. New Jersey was comfortable and even wonderful, but changing homes was looking to the future and all that could be. 10-year-old Nathaniel found leaving his friends the hardest, but the best part of his new home are the new friends that he made.

When RTFH was established, three of the four merging congregations changed their synagogue building. Such flexibility was part of the history. Temple Isaiah, two years before the merger, had to quickly find a new space for the High Holy Days with a hole in their ceiling and a fear of falling debris. Just a few weeks before the holidays they figured out all the details and relocated to Queens College. As Rabbi Perelmuter reflected, it really helped them realize that it was the people and congregation, not the building that mattered. He said that despite the disruption, everyone was moved by the experience.

For Jews, home also has other meaning. “My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west,”⁴ penned Judah HaLevi 800 years ago. At every point in Jewish history, we have looked to the land of milk and honey as our hope to “be a free nation in our own homeland, the land of Zion and Jerusalem,” as Naphtali Herz Imber famously wrote in his 19th century poem, “Hatikvah.”

With the establishment of Israel on May 14, 1948, the government immediately strived to make it a new home for Jews across the world. The land of Israel welcomed Jews from across the globe and in 1950 passed “The Law of Return” ensuring the right of any Jew to immigrate to the Jewish homeland and a safe haven. Jews would now always be able to find a home giving life to Robert Frost’s words, “Home is the place that where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”⁵

Modern Israel is a safe haven for many Jews, and a complicated political entity for many others. Like some of our own homes, Israel can be complex, problematic, and still our home.

In RTFH’s 25th year, this is the time to focus on our home. My colleague Rabbi Paul Kipnes suggests we should invest in our synagogues and be members because “being part of a synagogue allows you to be part of a larger community... of your people.”

“Being part of a synagogue means promulgating values that your tradition, and you, hold dear.”

“Being part of a synagogue community is like ensuring that your ‘room’ is still there even if you go away to college. You can always come home to the same community. Or if you are an adult, you can not show up but we are still here.”

“Being part of a community teaches future generations that being a Jew matters.”⁶

So celebrate the 25th with us. You received a flier with the 4 major events to be held this year – a service, a speaker, a concert, and a picnic. There’s something for everyone and everything is for all of us. Celebrate 25 years – whether you’ve

been part of the whole quarter century or just a few years, you are part of the community to share together.

But then help us look ahead. Join us at the events, programs, services, and possibilities we have and be a greater part of our Temple. Volunteer, share, and donate to keep us strong right now. Help us with our redevelopment as we build towards the next 25 years. This is your Jewish, diverse, open, small but mighty, ever striving home. Like all homes, we don't do everything perfectly, but we'll do it much better with you as part of the family. Because you, the people of this congregation, are truly what makes it home.

It is said that in a mountain village in Europe many years ago there was a nobleman who spent a great deal of time contemplating what legacy he would leave to the people of his town. He decided to build a synagogue. At last, it was finished, and the townspeople came to inspect. They marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world.

But one of the townspeople was troubled and spoke up. "Where are the lamps? You forgot the lamps! How will we see?" The nobleman pointed to brackets, which were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp and light it. But each time you are not here," he said, "a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God's house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light."⁷

Bring the light home and help us celebrate 25 years both past and to the future.

¹ From the 1939 MGM Movie. In the L. Frank Baum book, Dorothy says, “I’m so glad to be at home again!”

² Isaiah 56:7.

³ Lois McMaster Bujold, *Barrayar* (1991).

⁴ Judah HaLevi, “My Heart Is in the East,” (1141).

⁵ Robert Frost, “Death of the Hired Man,” (1915).

⁶ From a public post on Rabbi Paul Kipnes’ Facebook page.

⁷ Multiple sources, but especially Rabbi Sheila Goloboy.